

Conversations with Nature Spirits: The Political Ecology of Power and Progress in Rural Zimbabwe

McAllister, G. & Chikukwa, M. Z.

Published PDF deposited in Coventry University's Repository

Original citation:

'Conversations with Nature Spirits: The Political Ecology of Power and Progress', in *Subtle Agroecologies: Farming with the Hidden Half of Nature*, ed. by J Wright, pub 2021 (ISBN 9781138339811)

Publisher: CRC Press

Open Access. This content is Open Access under the Creative Commons license CC BY-NC-ND

3 Conversations with Nature Spirits

The Political Ecology of Power and Progress in Rural Zimbabwe

Georgina McAllister
Coventry University

Mike Zeddy Chikukwa
Chikukwa Ecological Land Use Community Trust (CELUCT)

CONTENTS

Introduction.....	39
The Landscape and Its People.....	40
Changing Relationships with the Landscape	41
Culture Laced with Power.....	42
The Role of More-Than-Human Interactions in Generating Change	43
Arriving at Place	44
Coming Together on the Land to Heal the Past	45
Conclusion: Connecting the Dots	46
References	48

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, we present a discussion between a community activist and a political ecologist who reconnected high in Zimbabwe's remote Eastern Highlands, drawn together by Cyclone Idai, the most devastating to ever have hit Zimbabwe. The breath-taking backdrop to our discussion belies the hidden, but no-less dramatic, erosion of bio-cultural diversity, knowledge and social connection shaped by the colonial project since the end of the nineteenth century. This effectively paved the way for the persistence of coercive power relations into independence, and their tangible effects - land grabbing and livelihood loss, structured poverty and dependence, leaving people chronically exposed to disasters, political opportunism and conflicts. In this context, farming approaches that reconnect people to one another and their landscape are seeking to make meaning, restore collective agency, and heal the scars left by societies' most destructive tendencies. Yet the coercive, and sometimes violent environments where these approaches are being re-imagined are rarely conducive to connectivity and healing. Our discussion explores the spirits that inhabit the natural world, the mixed blessings of a crisis, and its capacity to create moments of reflection within which to re-imagine our world afresh.

In picking our way through the complexities of this remote place, this first disembodied voice comes from a so-called 'rational' political ecology perspective to both narrate the context and explore how power shapes our relationship with the environment and each other, while the second

embodied voice – italicised – comes from a ‘more-than-human’ perspective that is embedded, and wholly invested, in a traditionalism that holds the tripartite relationships between people, ecology and spirit world as sacred. While our ‘voices see through different eyes’, they often converge, as if reflecting an interior conversation, with all its inherent concurrence and discordance. As the conversation unfolds, we explore how both are understood in relation to layered and complex relationships and what this means for people farming across landscapes in Zimbabwe today.

Our starting point is a shared recognition of these interconnections, and that the rational technocratic approaches that have come to dominate through a dogmatic belief in the primacy of science often devoid of people, and the relentless developmentalism it perpetuates, have not historically served people, nor the ecology upon which they depend. Through this conversation that interweaves the inherent contradictions between traditionally wielded power, patriarchy and patronage, we attempt to arrive at a better understanding of traditional belief and its practices, and the powerful dissonances, synergies and energies they generate.

THE LANDSCAPE AND ITS PEOPLE

We first met when George started her doctoral research in Chikukwa in 2016. I was her impromptu cultural guide, advising on how to dress and address others, according to our customs. As we walked across the landscape, visiting the sacred ruins of our ancestors’ first settlement, a dawn ‘Jickenisheni’ drumming convergence as the sun rose over the mountains, and a rain making ceremony at the top of the watershed, we shared stories. We talked about how the Chikukwa clan came to be – how our forefather, Nzvinzvi, arrived from afar on the wing, in the form of ishwa, a flying ant. The ishwa is our clan’s totem which, in our African tradition, we are forbidden to harm. Long before we heard of Aladdin and his flying carpet, our tradition was rich with stories of how Nzvinzvi took to the sky, riding on a winnowing basket carrying out heroic deeds to protect the community from wrongdoings.

The remote enclave of Chikukwa sits at the end of the winding ungraded road before the mountains rise towards the Mozambique border. Chikukwa’s ten villages sit between a transboundary conservation area and Zimbabwe’s once-thriving forestry belt, the creation of each having shaped a history of evictions, land struggles and waves of cross-border migration that has defined local politics and ongoing land tensions. Despite the imposition of the border that formally divided the lands of the Gaza Nguni people under the Anglo-Portuguese Treaty of 1891, this now transnational community regularly crosses the porous border for ceremonial gatherings and rituals that reconnect its five villages in Mozambique. As such, Chikukwans remain one clan, sharing the same dialect and a royal family with a deep lineage, headed by Chief Chikukwa.

Together, our clan elders and the spirit medium visit a shrine in Mozambique called Maate to communicate with the ancestors, to ask the High God Mwari for protection against threats, such as drought, crop pests and diseases. Only after successive droughts are monetary donations collected for messengers to take sacred seed to the most important shrines as an offering.

Fanning across the steep hillsides, Chikukwa’s villages are fed by natural springs that have traditionally supported food production in home gardens. Chikukwa’s altitude, soils and rainfall conditions, where temperatures rarely fall below 3°C, are ideal for a range of crops, from coffee and tree crops (fruit and nuts) to vegetables and cereals. Until 2019, seasonal rain-fed agriculture was centred largely on maize production on the wetlands alongside the Musapa River, which flows through the Chimanimani Gap and on into Mozambique. One night, in March 2019, the alluvial soils that made this riverine environment so productive were washed away when the arrival of Cyclone Idai devastated the landscape for 3 days, depositing half the expected annual rainfall in only 12 hours, replacing soils with rivers of boulders from the surrounding mountains. Over these few days, 40% of cultivable land and 52% of seed were lost (Chatiza, 2019), placing further strain on resources and relationships in this populous mountain region.

While understanding that the destructive energy of the cyclone was generated by the warming currents jostling over the Indian Ocean, it is said by some that these currents were spawned by a jostling for control between two mermaids, producing immense pressure. When one mermaid lost, she fled up the Mozambique Channel, drawing the power of the cyclone with her to Zimbabwe.

In cultures globally, often depicted holding a mirror, mermaids are portentous in holding up a mirror to humankind. They can be displeased or antagonised at being disturbed, for instance, by pollutants or people of ill will. A water spirit that is considered neither good nor bad, s/he perhaps represents the antagonistic duality that exists within humanity, through which we may better understand ourselves and our relationship with nature.

A mermaid could pull you down and hold you in her deep pool, from where, if fortunate enough to be released after days, or even years, you would emerge enlightened. So despite her reputation for destruction, mermaids are spirits of good fortune. The force of the cyclone, while doing damage to landscapes, lives and livelihoods, created more pools and eddies to play host to new mermaids. Like the returning biodiversity, she provides a vision of hope for the future.

CHANGING RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE LANDSCAPE

The heart of our Mwari spiritual landscape lies in the Matopos Hills of south-western Zimbabwe where the vast granite rocks, piled seemingly precariously one on top of the other, attract impressive lightening and rainstorms. These rocks are said to be stitched onto the land – the needles having created the seams through which the water flows, and from which rivers below are formed. We believe that the pools inside the rocks of the Matopos contain the rain clouds and are identified as the source of all water.

Home to the High God Mwari, there are a number of important shrines within the Matopos Hills, the most senior of which is Njelele (or Matonjeni). The interior landscape of the shrines, still visited by emissaries from across Zimbabwe, Zambia and South Africa, is thought to represent the source of all social and biological life – with perennial pools, streams, trees, ancient San rock art and the rocks themselves from which the Voices emanate. In this way, shrines are ‘the nucleus of a living and active landscape’ (Zvaba, 1988 in Ranger, 1997: 22). Mwari adepts (or oracles) wear traditional leopard skins, sweep the shrines by hand, use stone tools to cut the grass and are forbidden to farm or trade. As messengers of Mwari, their instructions involve obligations to, and relationship with, the landscape.

This way of life has long been under attack from the ‘civilising’ forces of Christianity¹ and the not-unconnected technocratic implementation of conservation and pursuance of economic development. Michael Drinkwater referred to this as the ‘colonisation of the lifeworld of the Africa people in Zimbabwe’ that has led to the marginalisation of traditional religion and its adherents (1991: 107). With the march of settler colonialism and the growth of actively confrontational missions, many believed that God had left Njelele, and so the Voice could no longer be heard. What took place has been described as a form of ‘ideological warfare ... about the definition of community, patterns of production and hence about landscape’ (Ranger, 1999: 53). At the heart of this lay the early role of Christian missions to liberate people from the superstitions and coercive tendencies of customary authorities, headed by Chiefs, and promote agricultural modernisation for the creation of an entrepreneurial class. This was to lead to progressive nationalist thought and, inexorably, to national liberation. By the time of the liberation war, between 1964 and 1979, rain ceremonies (*makoto*) were still performed, but fewer people consulted the adepts. After 1980, intricate farming traditions fell into further

¹ Native Commissioners of the settler Rhodesian state in the nineteenth century allocated a religion to their area – having been influenced or lobbied by whichever was the dominant mission. Many Africans therefore became, by default, followers of a particular denomination, while they and/or others were directly influenced by mission teachings.

decline as identities were politicised beneath the layered struggles taking place between genders and generations, the new state and its curtailment of traditional authority (Alexander, 2014; Kriger, 1988), and the competing nationalisms that continue to define Zimbabwe's socio-political landscape today.

Despite these historico-political pressures on traditional belief systems, and the dissonance they created, particularly for Christians, many rural livelihoods today remain largely grounded in the indivisibility of the tripartite relationship between people, nature and the spirit world inhabited by the ancestors (Gonese et al., 2003).

For traditionalists like myself, and some Christians, traditional practice and belief continue to moderate resource-use through rules, relationships and norms, within which peoples' identity, cosmology and knowledge are deeply embedded.² Today, we may still collect and mix together open pollinated, drought-tolerant small grains before taking them to the shrine to soak in the waters to ask the ancestors for protection.

However, many of those dispossessed of their land and landscapes have suffered lost connections to knowledge and tradition, reinvented them around new lineage structures or renounced them in favour of monotheism and/or capitalism. And, just as agrarian change shaped reciprocal labour-sharing practices out of necessity, those practices embedded in social relations and place that enable responsiveness to change or stress (Richards, 1989) have, over time, been further eroded by social division, corruption and mistrust.

You see, to damage our ecology is to undermine human existence. In this way of knowing, being and meaning-making for knowledge production, our African religion enhances and generates self-confidence, provides meaning and direction and is a source of dynamism and creativity.

According to one African proverb, "Our world is like a drum; strike any part and the vibration is felt all over" ... ringing in the ears of the ancestors, the owners of the land' (Tarusarira, 2017: 408). Despite the association of traditionalism, for many, with the customary forces of domination, for Tarusarira it also has the capacity to increase one's ability to resist exploitation and domination. And so, in rural communities across Zimbabwe, Chikukwa included, where these rituals and relationships persist – having been recovered or reinvented to varying degrees – they do so syncretically with Christianity.

Many people, sometimes reluctantly, still observe chisi or the Chief's day, our traditional day of rest for the soil, as a mark of respect for the ancestors that reside there. They are reluctant because they are sanctioned and may be fined by traditional leaders, many of whom are also Christian converts.

CULTURE LACED WITH POWER

These contestations and the idiomatic expressions of suffering can be seen in the more recent adoption of climate narratives. For Wilson (1995), this demonstrates the use of discourses to serve different interests, from which one can draw a direct line between coercive state control, conservation and farming. When laid over Zimbabwe's agrarian question, these interrelated discourses are just as likely to be employed for the benefit of one group over another within any given community. Yet, the complex and artful negotiations that incorporate many competing local interests and narratives can also be seen in the blending of indigenous knowledge, contemporary permaculture and spiritual resource governance. This is echoed in Moore's (1996) exposition of material deprivations and symbolic ancestral claims which, when creatively fused and adapted in defence of livelihood, culture and environment, produce cultural meaning that can be employed effectively as a form of resistance to external (state) interference. In this way, 'the micro-politics of resource struggles are animated by local history, mediated by cultural idioms, and gendered through the different practices [that] men and women have pursued in defence of local livelihoods' (Moore, 1996: 140). And it is the relationship with these livelihood resources that has, over time, become politicised and marred by endemic corruption, with customary leaders and elected politicians leveraging their position to consolidate patronage networks in return for loyalty, at others' expense.

² See also Bernard (2003).

THE ROLE OF MORE-THAN-HUMAN INTERACTIONS IN GENERATING CHANGE

This conversation hosted at the Chikukwa Ecological Land Use Community Trust, a small community-generated organisation that emerged in 1991, when some residents noticed that their village spring was drying up, seems prescient.

This group would meet to discuss and plan their actions, working side by side to replant the steep water catchment with indigenous trees, and to create awareness of the need to protect these areas. The springs and pools below hold special significance as sacred places in which water spirits and mermaids reside and, if disturbed, will abandon the spring so that the water will stop flowing. According to our custom, it is forbidden to clean black pots (used for cooking) or to use soap when washing in the springs.

From a Western rationalist perspective, this links deeply held spiritual beliefs with practical water quality considerations for downstream users.

As may be the case, nonetheless, this re-linking of the cultural, spiritual and ecological from the outset ensured that the group had the support of the Chief, who later gifted 1 hectare (ha) of land for the development of our permaculture centre.

The drought and cyclone that followed in 1992 also had a devastating effect in Chikukwa. This dramatic event, while far less destructive than the more recent cyclone, served as a catalyst for change.

With more people joining the voluntary workforce to rehabilitate our landscape, much of the knowledge travelled from household to household, farmer to farmer, with many developing their home plots with orchards depending on rainwater catchment patterns, and sharing and adapting skills.

In this way, traditional knowledge and wisdom was blended with exogenous strategies and ideas through extended networks.³

As our reputation grew, we generated funds by training others, and our community was able to support its own projects. Indigenous trees and woodlots were planted, with seed collected from different areas. Erosion gullies were filled with stones and planted with wattle. Chikukwa's terraces took shape from contoured swales with raised bunds planted with vetiver grass, and bananas, previously thought impossible to grow, are now a major crop for consumption and trade. As terracing reduced soil loss, yield improvements were quickly apparent; and the introduction of trees led to increased availability of diverse foods.

These patterns, mapped from previous crises, are important for the recollection of our historical memory – thought to have been washed away by the 2019 cyclone, again leaving people exposed and vulnerable to manipulation. Yet, nothing ever stands still.

Successive events since Zimbabwe's independence in 1980 have seen the population of Chikukwa expand exponentially, with people bringing with them different faiths and cultural norms. Some were workers stranded after the collapse of the logging industry and de-industrialisation in 2003, while others were Chikukwans from Mozambique who arrived after the 2001 designation of the Transfrontier Conservation Area. Further migratory flows resulted from the politically motivated urban clearances of 2005.⁴ Those arriving with few farming skills placed significant pressure on fuel wood resources. This period is viewed as one of significant social–ecological disruption in Chikukwa.

In 1991, before the other pressures, they had already started misbehaving ... they cut down trees in sacred spaces and even around springs. There was an old mbuya [grandmother] looking after

³ Zimbabwe was also an early adopter of agroecology, since Australian permaculturalist Bill Mollison was invited to host the first workshop in Harare by a pioneering group of concerned teachers with links to Chikukwa in 1988.

⁴ Referred to colloquially as the 'tsunami' due to its wide social impacts, Operation Murambatsvina ('to clean out the filth') is thought to have directly evicted 700,000 people, with 2.4 million people nationally affected by the resulting rural migration (Potts, 2006).

the springs [as the keeper]. But it was because of the clearing in water catchment areas, and due to lack of knowledge. People were just cutting trees for farming – it was bare. There was much less water. The history and links were lost as people died – and the new owners didn't have that understanding. It was not just new people coming in. Some were not respecting the elders. Then [in the 2000s] they took advantage when the Chief passed away – some took other peoples' fields, and cut down trees, and even destroyed the contour ridges ... They didn't value what we had built.

What is described here began in the post-independence period characterised by the rapacious liquidation of natural assets, when *freedom farming* became commonplace as an expression of popular resistance to customary coercion and state control (Mukamuri, 1995a) and the interrelated struggles for rural authority. Migration undoubtedly led to changing cultural norms governing social–ecological relationships and associated practices. But so too has the loss of farming knowledge as a result of earlier (semi-)proletarianisation, beginning with colonial interventions and evictions into the present day. With a continuation of these colonial productivist logics that aimed to project the modernity of a newly independent Zimbabwe, the 'liberation initiatives have found it very difficult to 'unthink' the epistemologies created by others' (in Murisa and Chikweche, 2015: XX). These factors have combined to fundamentally alter social–ecological relationships and, with it, the land-use practices that continue to shape change in Chikukwa.⁵

Where Chikukwa's permaculture-inspired projects and programmes sought a somewhat pragmatic and purposive approach, we both wonder whether something fundamental was missed with regard to the human–nature spirit connections. Or maybe the community was resistant and unwilling to hear anything of traditional ways, that is until they were visited by the cyclone over those three destructive days of March 2019.

Yes, this is possible. So, in an attempt to reconnect people through our peace and sustainable farming programmes, I began an Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) initiative, as a response to the erosion of knowledge, landscape and trust, including declining trust in our traditional leadership. This initiative aims to re-engage the community in the preservation of bio-cultural diversity, through an ongoing exploration that accepts the dynamic nature of traditions and practices, and the power inequities that can be engendered, to begin a conversation about the changes people want.

Based at an open-sided thatched meeting house, the initiative aspires to map sacred places alongside keystone species, and to revalue knowledge about indigenous plant lore, ritual and healing practices. This includes the introduction of elements of mindfulness artfully blended with cultural thought and practice. These seemingly innocuous processes nonetheless meet some resistance.

In times of change and uncertainty, it also aspires to bridge our religious, political and generational divides to improve understanding, to repair community cohesion in the face of more recent threats and to restore the community's deep connection with our spirit ecology.

As the community seeks to make meaning from the devastation, we turn to deep-rooted questions of what has been lost and how to rehabilitate not only the landscape, but the community's connections with the nature spirits.

ARRIVING AT PLACE

So it was, in March 2019 and within days of the passing of Cyclone Idai that isolated the community from the outside world for 2 weeks, that two strangers appeared on foot with a message.

Each through their dreams had been guided, like wise men from afar, to visit with Chief Chikukwa and instruct him to prepare a ceremony, involving the surrounding Chiefs, to appease the nature

⁵ As a result of these population and resource-use pressures, the steeply deforested slopes were increasingly unable to retain their soils and nutrients. The lack of infiltration resulted in poor groundwater storage and erosion, with large gullies beginning to open up and channelling fast-flowing water and landslides down towards homesteads and villages, resulting in consistently poor harvests.

spirits with rapoko [finger millet], a culturally important small grain collected and offered during makoto. To the astonishment of many, some of the chiefs came empty-handed, breaking with tradition. Soon after the ceremony, involving over 150 people, the strangers left. No one ever saw them again or knew their names.

After the meeting, when our traditional leaders consulted the most important spirit medium in the Southern Africa region, Sekuro Matota, it was revealed that the nature spirits were angry and needed to be cooled down. He pointed to areas of Chimanimani that had been particularly hard-hit, and whose Chiefs had turned their backs on traditional practices and on their chiefly function, as many see it, to unite their communities – instead reverting to the punitive strategies they have become some accustomed to. This ran alongside accusations that those same Chiefs were diverting the grains traditionally collected from community members who worked collectively at the Zunde raMambo (the Chief's or 'king's' field) to feed the most vulnerable, and were instead feeding their own families or supporters, or selling them for personal gain. Each chieftaincy was therefore instructed to visit sites with strong energy centres, many of which had been long neglected, and to hold a ceremony involving their entire communities. In appeasing the nature spirits of our damaged landscapes, these events were also called to rebuild the unity and trust that has been eroded in our community over decades. Some chiefs acted on this, while others did not.

Patterns of cultural introspection and spiritual renewal, seen through an historical lens, as with the ebb and flow of sociocultural, socio-political and natural crises, have most often followed intense periods of drought (Maxwell, 1995, 2005). The search for answers can result in moral panics aligned with the loss of cultural traditions – responsibilities for which are commonly laid at the door of, and felt most keenly by, women (McAllister, 2018). With every wave to re-establish fading traditions come new attempts to reinvent the past to remake tradition, or reinforce existing power relations. As with Christian–Traditionalist relationships and practices, the by-now well-worn practice of syncretic blending for broad-based appeal and legitimacy is well established. Herein, the re-establishment of a tripartite relationship plays out on a political tightrope. If critical of government, growing political opposition can result in rumours that delegitimise a movement's authenticity and, if too skewed towards traditionalism, can meet with opposition from power-holders in established churches. As recounted by Mawere and Wilson (1995) of the expansion of the Mbuya Juliana cult⁶ after the devastating 1992 drought, such attempts also run the risk of co-option by the narrow interests and agendas of traditional leaders to recover eroded political authority through the reclaiming of ritual practice and tradition.

There is no clear line between traditionalists and Christians. In fact, many of our traditional leaders, and indeed Chiefs, are also observant Christians, leading to accusations by traditionalists that they have 'lost their way'.

What perhaps links both is that they are regularly courted by, and part of, entrenched political patronage networks that hold these ecologies of violence very much in place. The complex alliances of convenience formed to variously resist, comply and/or transgress this equilibrium, while vital for everyday survival, can at once undermine popular support and spiritual authority for the core messages of social–ecological unity.

COMING TOGETHER ON THE LAND TO HEAL THE PAST

In an era of increasing climate disruption, the cyclone is just the latest in a long line of destructive events – seen through the microcosm of this one community.

We are living with the effects of our past – colonisation was intended to disempower – to disconnect people from their world, and to sow not seeds of harvest, but division. Before, you could be

⁶ Mbuya Juliana became a cult figure across Zimbabwe, preaching to vast gatherings about a return to traditional culture, and environmental values and farming practices. She claimed to have emerged, with her newfound wisdom, from the grips of a mermaid.

under a tree and ask for food. It wasn't magic; it was a strong connection between the creator and the people.

Within historical memory, trees on cropland were forbidden, seen as hampering productivity. The punishment for such agricultural transgressions was imprisonment. People were even ordered to remove sacred fig trees that were not only indicators of water, but providers of abundance during drought years, and under which communities would gather (Mukamuri, 1995b). The loss of these sacred places, the ritual of sharing, spending time talking about what happened in the past, and learning from and connecting through each other's innate spirituality are still keenly felt.

Folk stories can be written down and documented, but these are our stories, to be repeatedly communicated across generations. The loss of spaces for communication is the same as losing the power of communication. As these stories that guide people through times of change and upheaval are lost, memory is wiped, and the ground for division is sown.

Concerns about the loss of sacred woodland and the pollution of sacred springs connect to concerns about destructive farming practices and the loss of intricate land-use systems associated with riverine gardens, dryland farming and livestock rotations. They relate also to how farmers use intentionality to celebrate or to give thanks, in the field or at home.

When planting seeds, we are not simply planting in the ground, but placing them in different parts of the field as an offering. In the same way, before eating, we remove our shoes and place the grain around different corners of the home. The food is cooked without salt, as a mark of purity and respect. We believe that these rituals protect the home and fields from damage.

In 2017, an infestation of the moth larvae of the fall armyworm, *Spodoptera frugiperda*, damaged some 150,000 ha of maize and millet in Zimbabwe (FAO, 2017) and led to a state of national emergency. Many farmers were advised to use a pesticide or experiment with integrated pest management, while others deposited sharp lacerating sand in the central core of the emerging leaves that harbours the larvae, to great effect.

In Chikukwa, on the first reports of fall armyworm in 2018, a ceremony was arranged. The larvae were collected by hand and placed in a calabash before being taken to a sacred pool where ceremonial songs were sung, and the calabash was left overnight. The following morning, no larvae were found in anyone's field across the community, which remained free of fall armyworm for the rest of the season. The effectiveness of this traditional response seemed as surprising to the community as the process may seem to outsiders. Nonetheless, the response to why it was effective rests with a belief in the power of actions that benefit the collective. This is because, when the rain falls, it doesn't fall on one man's field. When a disaster attacks, it doesn't just attack one man or one woman.

On returning to the question about authentic spirituality in context, one of us is reminded of the challenges closer to home. Our conversation has highlighted the disconnect between leaders failing to honour their commitments, protect important spaces, undertake their duties fairly and transparently and support the needs of all in a non-partisan way. Life in this beautiful yet troubled microcosm may not be as different as we, elsewhere, may like to believe.

CONCLUSION: CONNECTING THE DOTS

The moment that you use your intention to work the land – you are aware of the life in the soil. And at that moment, you give value to where you are standing. Self-awareness needs time and honesty to oneself, and trust between people to explore these things openly. It calls on us to learn to listen to the landscape – to the suffering of the earth, to the rivers and trees and to the anger of the nature spirits – now only ever heard above the avarice and poverty during a gasping drought or raging cyclone. Finding ways of listening to, and within, our ecosystem is more important than ever.

These connections are celebrated through the embodied performance of rituals that have dynamically responded to changes over time and generation. Just perhaps, we ponder, in the search for engaged social relationships in these fragile environments, a new syncretism with agroecology is emerging: one that blends the spiritual importance of small grains with their drought tolerance and nutritional benefits; sees climate change narratives as one with the disruption of complex ecosystems, complete with sacred pools and coppices; and seeks to rebuilt trust and failing community structures by respecting and upholding principles of equity and social justice. While perhaps naïve to suggest that anywhere will be free of power reproduction and the structures it perpetuates, it does hold the potential to reinvigorate a sense of efficacy and optimism to effect, albeit cautious, change.

Here, we ponder the value of social farming in re-forging relationships through which social-ecological change may be negotiated and alternative sources of agency and identity may be cultivated to transcend these deeply entrenched patterns of division and (self-)destruction. Moments of renewal are an important articulation of a deeply held dissatisfaction with an equilibrium that holds poverty and marginalisation in place. Yet this comes with a recognition that these same calls to tradition risk co-option by the very forces that benefit from that equilibrium.

I see spirituality as one – it's the source. You talked about re-imagining and revaluing – it's like connecting the dots. We're lucky that we still have dots to connect. But only just, they are disappearing before our eyes. Just look where we are George – we could be the richest people!

Somewhere between the destructive power of cyclones and the popular anger that resulted in the destruction of 'freedom farming' as a popular reflex against coercive power is the collective will to help the landscape and its hosts to regenerate – building bridges, figuratively and literally, that reconnect peoples across landscapes to mobilise knowledge and build new alliances.

Perhaps what joins our conversation is a drive for a socially engaged and authentic, yet quiet and non-confrontational, form of activism. The boundaries here are not always clear and, we agree, have yet to unfold. Where activists tend to rush in, action generated through connections to spirit requires room to breathe and accumulate. Our motivations converge under the increasingly urgent need to recover lost knowledge, to open up and explore different pathways.

Where historical memory is thought to have been washed away by the cyclone, people are more exposed than ever to coercion, be it political or religious, in pursuit of power and influence. Reconstructing our world in new ways requires the recovery of memory. Ritual practice can play an important role in this critical reconnection. Critical, because this is surely not about tightly reconstructing the past, but finding new ways in which the past can better explain the present and inform the future. Critical, because this requires open dialogues about what is retained, what is left behind, what is dynamically co-constructed and by whom.

Ultimately, we are creative creatures, and we have been recreating and redesigning our traditions for millennia.

As ever-more extreme weather events are projected globally and predictions of the worst drought on record since 1992 for Zimbabwe's coming 2020 farming season (Manatsa, 2020), we both wonder whether this small community will find the energy to artfully challenge patterns of degradation, and to collectively re-imagine the long-broken social contract to turn the tide.

Crises are nothing if not traumatic yet magical moments that inspire human reflection, in concert with our rich knowledge ecologies, and call on our creative powers to re-imagine our world afresh.

One of us is reminded of the words of an esteemed agricultural extension specialist that 'nothing worthwhile has ever been achieved without an element of coercion'.⁷ Yet one could equally argue that nothing at all effective or durable has ever been achieved with coercion. Historically, the uptake

⁷ Informal conversation with national university professor, 28 November 2019.

of farming techniques and technologies has been utterly rejected unless deeply imbedded in existing knowledge. Hence, if history has taught us anything at all, it is perhaps that the art of syncretism has sustained, whomever marshals it, to mobilise and drive change. So it continues, in Zimbabwe and beyond, that we are left swimming against a powerful tide. And just perhaps, out of these crises, we may all emerge from the depths of that pool more enlightened.

REFERENCES

- Alexander, J. (2014) Things fall apart, the centre can hold: Processes of post-war political change in Zimbabwe's rural areas. *Occasional Paper*, 8: 131–162. Oxford: University of Oxford.
- Bernard, P.S. (2003) Ecological implications of water spirit beliefs in Southern Africa: The need to protect knowledge, nature, and resource rights. *USDA Forest Service Proceedings RMS*, 27: 148–153.
- Chatiza, K. (2019) Cyclone Idai in Zimbabwe: An analysis of policy implications for post-disaster institutional development to strengthen disaster risk management. Oxfam Briefing Paper, November 2019. Oxford: Oxfam GB.
- Drinkwater, M. (1991) *The State and Agrarian Change in Zimbabwe's Communal Areas*. New York: Springer.
- FAO (2017) Fall army worm outbreak, a blow to prospects of recovery for Southern Africa. *FAO Regional Office for Africa*. Briefing, February 2017. <http://www.fao.org/africa/news/detail-news/en/c/469532/> (accessed November 30th, 2019).
- Kruger, N.J. (1988) The Zimbabwean war of liberation: Struggles within the struggle. *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 14(2): 304–322.
- Manatsa, D. (2020) Drought looms over Zimbabwe. *The Herald*. <https://www.herald.co.zw/drought-looms-over-southern-africa/> (accessed January 4th, 2020).
- Mawere, A. and Wilson, K. (1995) Socio-religious movements, the state and community change: Some reflections on the Ambuya Juliana cult of southern Zimbabwe. *Journal of Religion in Africa/Religion en Afrique*, 25: 252.
- Maxwell, D. (1995) The Church and Democratisation in Africa: The case of Zimbabwe. In: Gifford, P. (ed.), *The Christian Churches and the Democratisation of Africa*. Leiden: EJ Brill, pp. 108–129.
- McAllister, G. (2018) Cultivating social-ecological relationships at the margins: Agroecology as a tool for everyday peace formation in fragile environments. Unpublished PhD thesis. Coventry: CAWR, Coventry University.
- Moore, D. (1996) Marxism, culture, and political ecology: Environmental struggles in Zimbabwe's Eastern Highlands. In: Peet, R. and Watts, M. (eds.), *Liberation Ecologies: Environment, Development, Social Movements*. London: Routledge, pp. 125–147.
- Mukamuri, B.B. (1995a) Local environmental conservation strategies: Karanga religion, politics and environmental control. *Environment and History*, 1(3): 297–311.
- Mukamuri, B.B. (1995b) Making sense of social forestry. PhD thesis, Tampere: University of Tampere.
- Murisa, T. and Chikweche, T. (2015) *Beyond the Crisis: Zimbabwe's Prospects for Transformation*. Harare: Weaver Press.
- Potts, D. (2006) 'Restoring order'? Operation Murambatsvina and the urban crisis in Zimbabwe. *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 32(2): 273–291.
- Ranger, T.O. (1997) Making Zimbabwean landscapes: Painters, projectors and priests. *Paideuma: Mitteilungen zur Kulturkunde*, Bd 43: 59–73. Frankfurt: Frobenius Institute.
- Ranger, T.O. (1999) *Voices from the Rocks: Nature, Culture and History in the Matopos Hills of Zimbabwe*. Oxford: James Currey.
- Richards, P. (1989). Agriculture as a Performance. In: Chambers, R., A. Pacey, A. and Thrupp, L. (eds), *Farmer First: Farmer Innovation and Agricultural Research*. London: Intermediate Technology, pp. 39–43.
- Tarusarira, J. (2017) African religion, climate change, and knowledge systems. *The Ecumenical Review*, 69(3): 398–410.
- Wilson, K.B. (1995) 'Water used to be scattered in the landscape': Local understandings of soil erosion and land use planning in southern Zimbabwe. *Environment and History*, 1(3): 281–296.